



Impact of the city income tax issue on the University District: What you need to know before you vote

The University District Organization (UDO) has produced the following analysis for residents, property owners and other stakeholders of the neighborhoods of the University District. Founded in 1971, UDO is a non-profit, non-partisan civic organization which provides a variety of neighborhood services in the University District, including planning, management, promotion, communications, and civic engagement.

Tax proposal

Columbus City Council has placed a proposal to raise the city income tax on the ballot at a special election on August 4, 2009. The proposal would raise the city income tax from 2% to 2.5%. The income tax is a payroll tax collected from those who work or live in the city of Columbus, but it is not imposed on other types of income, such as Social Security payments.

Characteristics of the University District

As defined by Columbus City Code, the University District is bounded by Fifth Avenue on the south, Glen Echo Ravine on the north, the Olentangy River on the west and the Conrail railroad tracks on the east. The district is 2.83 square miles with 43,700 residents. (All demographic information is based on the 2000 Census unless otherwise noted.) The population density is more than 2.5 times the city as a whole. The median household income in 1999 was \$19,846 in the University District, compared with \$37,897 for Columbus as a whole. Reflecting the number of college students living in the University District, the media age was 23.3, compared with 30.6 for Columbus.

The University District has 17,538 housing units, but the homeownership rate is 12.5% compared with 49.1% for Columbus. The percent of persons (age 5+) living in the same house in 1995 and 2000 was 15.9% for the University District, compared with 41.7% for Columbus. More than one-third of the housing units in the University District were built prior to 1940, compared with 14% for Columbus. Nearly 60% are more than 50 years old, compared with 35% for Columbus.

Although many of the demographics of the University District likely have not changed greatly since the 2000 Census, a survey of student housing conducted in 2008 estimated that about 15,000 Ohio State students live in the University District. The trend that saw students moving out of the University District through the mid-1990s appears to have been reversed.

While the demographics for the University District are somewhat different than the city as a whole, these figures don't reflect the diversity within the neighborhoods of the University District. While some neighborhoods have a relatively high level of homeownership and major investments in historic housing preservation, other neighborhoods have extraordinary levels of government-subsidized low-income housing. The predominantly student neighborhood has the Census tracks with highest population densities in the state, while a few neighborhoods are clustered around park-like ravines and the Olentangy River.

The density, transience and youthfulness of the population, the concentration of poverty, the older public infrastructure and residential buildings, and crime and fire safety concerns – all of these place demands on municipal services. Over the past 15 years, the City of Columbus has worked with stakeholders of the University District to enhance these services, including police and fire, refuse collection, code enforcement, street lighting, alley resurfacing, water and sewer upgrades, and street sweeping.

Although the University District is a major recipient of municipal services, the University District also is a major source of tax revenue. Property values throughout most of the University District – and in particular the densely populated student neighborhood – are high. These properties generate millions of dollars in property tax revenue, primarily for Columbus City Schools. For the City of Columbus, however, The Ohio State University is one of the top sources of city income tax revenue. In 2007-08, Ohio State's annual payroll for all employees was \$1.627 billion.

Impact of loss of municipal services

The city auditor has estimated that, without the proposed income tax increase, city revenues will fall more than \$100 million short of the amount needed to maintain current municipal services in 2010. More than 70% of the city's annual budget is allocated for police, fire and public safety. The mayor and city council members have not delineated precisely how they would balance the city's 2010 budget if the voters reject the proposed tax increase. The following information is drawn from public documents, discussions with city officials, and knowledge of existing services to determine the impact in the University District if the proposed tax increase is not approved.

Public safety

- Several hundred police officers, fire fighters and medics would be laid off.
- As a practical matter, most of the police officers in the specialized bureaus, such as the Strategic Response Bureau and its Community Liaison Section, likely would be transferred to the Patrol Bureau. Routine street patrols would be maintained, but many crime prevention efforts involving citizens could be curtailed.
- The Columbus Police Division's "walkie crew" in the University District and the joint patrol with The Ohio State University Police Department likely would be curtailed.

- Much fewer resources would be available for special police patrols to prevent burglaries and related crimes during winter and spring breaks.
- The Community Crime Patrol, which has already had its support from the city cut substantially, likely would close completely because its support from The Ohio State University has been contingent on CCP also receiving city dollars.
- With fewer fire fighters, response times likely would increase. Although dumpster fires in the University District have been less prevalent in the last few years, they remain a concern. The city's Refuse Collection Division will not have the resources to empty dumpsters as a measure to help prevent these fires. The older housing stock of the University District requires vigilance in fire inspections.

Refuse collection

- The city's Refuse Collection Division will consider changing regular refuse collection from weekly to every other week.
- Bulk refuse collection will be ended. Property owners and managers will be responsible for the removal of bulk refuse (i.e., furniture, mattresses, appliances, floor coverings) from their properties. Thousands of students move out of their University District apartments each August, resulting in hundreds of tons of bulk refuse in the alleys.
- Litter and illegal dumping, including theft of service, are likely to increase dramatically throughout the University District.

Code enforcement

- The population density, older buildings and market demand for rental housing place heavy demands on the city's code enforcement staff in the University District. In the last decade, code enforcement officers have worked proactively with property owners and residents to address code violations, including illegal conversions, inappropriate uses of property, and noise. The almost-certain loss of more code enforcement staff will result in less vigorous enforcement to the detriment of well-managed rental property and homeownership.

Planning

- The complexity of the University District with its variety of neighborhoods, population density and diversity, and unique real estate market has required careful planning and land-use regulation by the city's Planning Division over the years. The likely loss of additional staff in the Planning Division and other divisions of the Development Department could reduce the collaborative efforts among The Ohio State University, the city and neighborhood stakeholders to address quality-of-life issues.
- Staff reductions in the Planning Division could affect the work of the University Area Review Board, slowing economic development, new construction and renovation along High Street and in the University Impact District.

Recreation

- Maintenance of Tuttle Park and Weinland Park is likely to be reduced. Tuttle Park pool, which gets the highest usage of any city pool, likely would be closed. (To meet its 2009 budget, the city leased Tuttle Park Recreation Center to the Campfire Girls.)
- With fewer resources, the city likely would reduce its attention to the Iuka and Glen Echo ravines, which are significant natural features in the University District.

Social services

- The city likely would reduce significantly its funding for a number of social service agencies which serve senior citizens and low-income families. While the University District is characterized by its significant population of college students, the district also has the city's highest concentration of project-based Section 8 housing. Reductions in city support for these agencies would have an impact on these families, although it's difficult to calculate at this time.

July 22, 2009

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